This month’s Chains...

Houdiniopoly
Ilea wins!
How Houdini Did His Deeds
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Can you be beaten?
Begging Box
Dan Harlan on Tarbell

MEZMER'S DAUGHTER
MINDFREAKS CRISS ANGEL!
by Michael Mezmer

The superstar of magic Criss Angel hosted a contest and my daughter Ilia won it.

As many of you know both Ilia and I are major fans of Criss, so it was a lot of fun to create Ilia's video. The contest challenge was to present your best Criss Angel magic demonstration. Ilia chose to do an escape in tribute to Criss's Jail Cell Escape episode from his Mindfreak TV show.

Ilia presented an escape from classic Darby handcuffs, the same style of cuffs Criss was challenged to escape from. Ilia won a beautiful personally autographed poster of Criss's Vegas show and one of his latest t-shirts. Special thank you to Criss for choosing Ilia as his winner and to the Mindfreak Street Team for supporting the fans.
1. **Handcuffs:** Harry Houdini could get out of any set of handcuffs. He often added a river or lake to the escape trick to spice things up a bit. People came to his stage shows with elaborate sets of their own, and the local police were encouraged by Houdini to try to keep him restrained. Twice it took him over an hour to free himself, but none ever succeeded in keeping him cuffed. Even specialty one-off handcuffs with a single bespoke key could not hold Harry.

**What really happened:** Many thought that he had trick-release stage cuffs but the truth was more simple – Houdini studied picking locks from a very early age. Sometimes he could just hit the handcuffs, at a certain angle and with enough force, for them to spring open. Other times a thin piece of string was enough to pull a screw from the locking mechanism and open it. Most times, however, he had a skeleton key hidden in the palm of his hand or sleeve. For the specialty handcuffs with only one key, Houdini would ask to inspect the cuffs and key, secretly handing the key to an assistant – who would go back stage and choose a similar-looking key for Houdini’s vast collection. Houdini would simply hand back the lookalike key before miraculously escaping using the real one.

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Stephen Marr for Metro.co.uk
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Harry Houdini, who astounded audiences with his illusions until his death in 1926. The seemingly impossible stunts performed by master escapologist Harry Houdini have confused and delighted generations.

Breaking locks, escaping submerged boxes, getting out of straitjackets, the fiendish Chinese Water Torture routine – his feats were simply astounding.

Yet magic always has a simple explanation and, in Houdini’s case, his methods were in fact far more ingenious and impressive than the trick itself.

The 52-year-old died on Halloween 1926, possibly as a result of one of his most famous stunts going wrong.

The explanation of his methods have cause outrage among the magic community, with many saying they still perform some of the tricks.

But, hey guys, some of these are more than 100 years old. Don’t you think your paying audience deserves some new material? At the risk of being sown in half by the Magic Circle, here are ten of Houdini’s greatest stunts – and how he did them.
3. Milk Can: This was Houdini’s most enduring and dazzling escape. After audience members examined his milk can for sturdiness and any trick escape mechanisms, and watched it filled with water, Houdini asked the audience to hold its breath as he climbed inside and allowed the top of the milk can to be locked in place – many times with locks that audience members had brought with them. This took about a minute – a lot longer than most audience members could hold their breath. A curtain was pulled and, in what seemed like an impossible three minutes, a soaked Houdini would appear and show the can, its locks still in place.

What really happened: The top of the can, while made to look like it was riveted in place, could easily come away – but only when pushed up from the inside. Locks through eyelets in the top of the can would not be undisturbed while Houdini got out and put the top back on. He then waited a dramatic amount of time before revealing himself. Despite the relative simplicity of this illusion, it did mean that Houdini had to hold his breath inside the can for as long as a minute as the locks were being put in place.

2. Hanging Straitjacket Escape: Straitjackets are purpose-made to restrain people, so it was an eye-popping feat to see a man wrapped up in one, dangling high off the ground from a rope tied to his feet. Houdini was famous for this stunt, regularly performing a jacket escape while hoisted up in front of the theatre where he would be putting on his evening show. He did the stunt in public in a bid to swell audience numbers, and it worked.

What really happened: When the jacket was being put on, Houdini would: cross his arms so his dominant right arm was on top; breathe in a huge gulp of air to make his chest bigger; and pinch and grab the material of the jacket to take up any slack before it was buckled. Breathing out and letting go of the slack gave him a lot of room to maneuver, but it was a matter of using brute strength to pull his right arm over his head. Once he had both arms in front of him he would undo the straps and buckles with his teeth, or a cutting tool he had ‘palmed’ before the jacket was put on. Hanging upside down, while seemingly making the stunt more dangerous, actually helped Houdini perform the trick, because gravity worked in his favor. If all else failed, Houdini could create more room inside the jacket by dislocating his shoulder – but it’s not something he wanted to do a lot.
4. **Underwater Box:** Combining a number of Houdini’s strengths – handcuffs, locks, holding his breath – this stunt involved a handcuffed Houdini being put into a wooden packing crate. The lid was nailed shut, ropes and chains were added and locked in place, and then the crate was craned into a river, where it immediately sank. After what seemed like an eternity, Houdini would bob to the surface – free of the box and his handcuffs.

**What really happened:** Houdini was out of the handcuffs before the box was even nailed shut. The box not only had holes drilled in it so it could fill with water and sink quickly, it also had a hidden panel on one side which opened to allow Houdini to escape once the box was in the water, and then it was a matter of how much suspense he wanted to build before he surfaced.

5. **Chinese Water Torture Cell:** There’s no evidence to suggest the Chinese ever used this as a torture method, but the title certainly put bums on seats. Houdini would be hoisted above a water-filled tank, his feet locked in wooden stocks, and lowered inside.

**What really happened:** It was more a matter of gymnastics than magic. The stocks ‘restraining’ Houdini were rigged so he could free his feet once the curtain was drawn. They were also hinged so he could get out of the tank and set the stocks back so it looked like they were still locked in place. On October 11, 1926, an accident while hoisting Houdini fractured one of his ankles.

6. **Iron Stomach:** Houdini famously said he could withstand any blow to the abdomen, and regularly invited audience members up to give him their best shot. No matter how hard they wailed on him, he seemed totally unfazed.

**What really happened:** There was no real trick to this. Houdini could prepare his stomach muscles to take the blow, and it was a combination of muscle control and fine acting to make it look like he was unaffected.

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A great tribute site to the amazing David De-Val

http://www.davidde-val.com/
The trick may have contributed to his death. On October 24, 1926 (13 days after fracturing his ankle) Houdini suffered a ruptured appendix when a fan repeatedly hit him before he had prepared. At the time, Houdini was in his dressing room lying down – not standing, as he had always done to prepare himself – because of his fractured ankle. The ruptured appendix led to the peritonitis that killed him a week later.

7. **Metamorphosis:** A breathtaking illusion performed by Houdini and his wife Beatrice. Houdini’s hands were bound, he was put in a sack that was tied shut at the top and put inside a box that was strapped and padlocked shut. Beatrice would draw a curtain around the box and clap three times, at which point the curtain would fly open to reveal Houdini standing there. The box was unlocked and unstrapped, and the bag undone to reveal Beatrice inside, her hands tied.

**What really happened:** Houdini was a master with ropes and locks. His hands, and the sack holding him, were tied using simple slip knots. He was free of the ropes and sack while his wife was locking and strapping the box where he was ‘trapped’. When the curtain was drawn, he slipped out of a panel at the back of the box and helped tie his wife’s hands and the sack before she got inside. The audience thought it was Beatrice clapping her hands but it was actually Houdini before he opened the curtain.

While he was undoing the straps and locks of the box, Beatrice made sure she looked as though she was trapped and bound inside. Harry and ‘Bessie’ practiced this trick so often they got their switch time down to an astonishing three seconds.

8. **The needle/razor trick:** It wasn’t all about breaking locks and holding his breath. In a potentially lethal stage act (the needle version was mystically called the East Indian Needle Trick), Houdini would get audience members to examine as many as 50 sewing needles or razor blades and a length of thread before he put them all on his tongue and drank the lot with a glass of water. Following a bit of abracadabra-rye, he would regurgitate the needles/ blades, perfectly strung along the thread – to the amazement of the crowd.

**What really happened:** Before the trick Houdini placed a packet between his cheek and teeth. The packet contained the needles/ blades already attached to the thread with knots either side, so they came out evenly and did not accidentally stay in his mouth. The real trick was what to do with the loose needles/blades that he put in his mouth at the beginning of the trick. He would either spit them into the water as he pretended to drink, leaving enough water in the glass to hide the needles/blades – or deftly moved the needles and blades with his tongue between his other cheek and teeth until the end of the illusion. Needless (no pun intended) to say, it took a lot of practice to get it right.

http://www.urbanninjablog.com/category/escapology/
9. Walking Through Walls: Houdini would perform his usual tricks as a team of bricklayers built a solid wall on stage. The wall cut the stage in half, was high and wide – it was impossible for Houdini to simply climb over or run around the front or back of the wall without the audience seeing. The wall was built on a large carpet that prevented the use of a trapdoor, and Houdini called up genuine audience members to hit the wall with hammers to prove it was solid. When the audience members sat back down, Houdini would position himself on one side of the wall and screens would be wheeled in. Almost straight away they would be wheeled back to reveal Houdini on the other side of the wall.

What really happened: Anyone who watched the recent Houdini TV drama starring Adrien Brody on Channel 4 will know how this one was done. The rug, instead of preventing the use of a trap door, actually hid a long trench in the stage. Once the trap door was opened, Houdini could pass under the wall via the sagging carpet and to the other side. The art was doing it quickly, so the audience literally did not have time to think about how it could be done.

10. Making an elephant disappear: Houdini did this incredible feat only once, but once is enough. Performed on January 7, 1918, at New York’s Hippodrome Theater, Houdini had an elephant brought on stage and led it into a large cabinet.

What really (possibly) happened: This one actually is a bit of a mystery, because the elephant cabinet, the Hippodrome Theater, and Houdini himself no longer exist. But those in on the trick – and, when an elephant’s involved, there has to be a few – suggest that the stunt was all about audience perspective. The stage of the Hippodrome was very large, and the elephant cabinet was positioned at the back. Even those in the front rows didn’t have a close-up view. The cabinet was supposedly square but was actually an oblong shape, and material that exactly matched the back curtain of the cabinet was connected by wires to a powerful spring-loaded roller that almost instantly pulled the material up to conceal the elephant behind it. Stage lighting helped to fool the audience’s eyes, and when Houdini fired the pistol without warning, it distracted the audience enough to miss the material being pulled into place.
Michael Griffin is so different from the run of the mill magician who escapes from their own boxes. Michael accepts challenges from your local residents and sponsors, this creates huge audience & media awareness because it's their challenge device, something they made, not Michael's and as the testimonies say "The public really responds and Michael played to HUGE audiences".

The stage is definitely set for an escape from the same old, acts the audience has seen a million times before. Crowds are really loving this and being an interactive part of it! ~ think outside of the box, Michael does or he loses $100k.

Michael Griffin

APPEARING ON AMERICA'S GOT TALENT & FEATURED ON MASTERS OF ILLUSION - MICHAEL GRIFFIN IS THE ONLY 2-TIME WINNER OF THE WORLD MAGIC AWARDS FOR BEST ESCAPE ARTIST.
On the previous page we have a challenge from Michael Griffin; $100,000 to anyone who can keep him a prisoner. Does Michael really have $100,000 to lose? I can only guess that there are rules and stipulations involved. Probably including something about Michael having a period of time in advance to see the restraint system.

Is Michael making an idle boast? I will say probably not. Let’s take a look. He has years of experience with various restraint systems. He has experience with locks and lock smithing. He has years of experience performing, so I will suggest, that like Houdini years before, and Steve Baker more recently, he is prepared to take on all comers.

I can’t speak for Houdini, but Steve had a strong rule that if you challenge him and he wins, he gets to keep your equipment. It gives the bettor something to lose. The performer of course has much to lose if not successful.

In my case personally, all I had to lose was my freedom (for a time) and my dignity. What did I win? Money! Of course, my name is not in the media, and I am not a full time professional Escape artist performing for a living. Many have much more to lose than I ever did.

So, on to the topic; can you be beaten. I can well imagine that many escape artists think about, even worry about what someone might do to mess them up. Remember Houdini was defeated by lead shot pellets rammed into the keyhole of a pair of ordinary and usually easy cuffs to get free from. That was an intentional sabotage.

Steve Baker told the story of a stage hand who sabotaged the stocks on the water
Torture cell in a deliberate attempt to commit murder supposedly over a woman. I can’t swear if that story is true or not, but it could have happened. As Steve tells it, he only got free through tenacity and a willingness to injure himself to get out.

Steve also tells of an adventure in Chile where his slow burning fuel mixture was replaced with gasoline. This was not an attempt to foil him as much as an effort to make the fire look better. The results could have been horrific, again if not for Steve’s tenacity.

Could you keep Michael a prisoner for $100,000? I believe I could, and I think you could too. If you are reading this you are either an escape artist, or an escape enthusiast. Either way you understand how escape work and what they take. How come no one ever picked the lock of the cell door at Alcatraz? Because the doors had neither locks nor keyholes on them. There was a long mechanism that held the doors shut with the lock itself being a very long distance from the prisoner’s reach. Some jailer thought about that long and hard.

I used to be concerned about Duck tape, until Helen Held told me how to beat it. (Anyone seen her lately?) Luckily for me, when I was doing my challenges Duck tape existed, but was not yet in common home use.

Perhaps it is a magnetic lock you fear? Magnetic locks do exist and have no keyhole for picking. Can they be shimmed? I would guess that a shim would be defeated by the magnetic attraction, but maybe... A friend of mine back in 6th grade had one of those, and he had a short length of chain to go with it. We would create makeshift handcuffs out of them when we played cops & robbers. At that age there were only two ways out; slip out if you could, or get released. We were all limber enough to step through and get our hands in front of us; so slip out was common.

My father-in-law once commented that he could foil my straitjacket escape by twisting the arms as he buckled them in. I did not take the challenge as I had nothing to win, and no need to prove myself. I could have though, and the joke would have been on him. I have no idea if that works or not and I don’t care. My second-hand jacket was “equipped” for just such an emergency. I don’t recall ever reading about a failed straitjacket escape. Have you?

So let me know what scares you in your escapes. I will gladly withhold you name if you prefer.
How many of you own the Tarbell series? How any of you own the series and have actually read it? How many of you have studied lesson 79 from volume six? This of course, is Harlan Tarbell’s section on escapes.

Dan Harlan, the magic star has taken it on himself to produce a series of video’s based on Tarbell’s masterpiece. Let me tell you, he has struck gold with this volume. Having bought, watched and reviewed Dan’s Pack Small Plays Big escape video last month, I found my appetite whet for more.

This video can be purchased as an instant download from penguin magic for the princely sum of $19.95 and it is worth every dollar.

http://www.penguinmagic.com/p/8975

What Dan has done in this video is to take the escapes that are presented in the Tarbell lesson, and both update them, and show them to us live. But wait, there’s more. Dan shows such things as staging, choreography, and even construction tips. Now, Dan is not a Carpenter, and he is the first one to admit it. However, he does show how to set up the pieces of the various contraptions you will need. If you have the skill, Da will make it easy on you. If you don’t you will need to find some assistance. The escapes Dan shows are...

- The Substitution Trunk Mystery:
- The Canvas Box Escape:
- The Royal Packing Box Escape:
- Grant's Packing Box Escape:
- Tarbell- Grant Packing Box Escape:
- Fischer-Bamberg Packing Box Escape:
- The Paper Bag Escape:
- The Bonbon Paper Bag Escape:

The last one is my favorite. Dan shows how to update this escape to using two plastic trash containers that are padlocked together. How can you get out of that! Strangely, the curtain is harder to build than the escape!

The Grant’s packing box escape is easy enough to build for the home hobbyist with standard garage tools.

The amazing thing here is that Dan Harlan is not an escape artist. He is a fine magician and a wonderful creator of magic, but not one of us... And yet he has risen above and beyond to produce this fine magical work.

Two thumbs up for this amazing $20 investment.